

Suzanne Presto, *Voice of America*

U.S. lawmakers convened a hearing on Capitol Hill Thursday to discuss the issue of child marriage and its effect on girls and society. Non-governmental organizations estimate issue affects 60 million girls worldwide.

As she sat on a panel testifying before U.S. lawmakers in Washington, D.C., 32-year-old Kakenya Ntaiya was very far from the Masai village in Kenya where she was raised.

"Myself, I was engaged when I was five-years-old and to be married as soon as I reached puberty," said Kakenya Ntaiya. "Throughout my childhood, I was constantly reminded that my husband was waiting."

Experts on women's and children's issues told the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission that millions of girls find themselves in similar situations, with about 20,000 of them becoming child brides each day.

But Kakenya Ntaiya did not become a child bride - she was an exception. Her mother wanted her to be educated, and they convinced the girl's father to allow her to place schooling over marriage.

"Eventually, I was able to convince the community to send me to college, something that had never been done by any girl in my village," she said.

Ntaiya is now working on her doctorate in education in the United States, and she is directing a school for girls she founded in her hometown.

Anju Malhotra, a vice president at the International Center for Research on Women, told

lawmakers that child marriage is devastating to both the individual girl and society.

"Where there is child marriage, we have the highest rates of maternal mortality," said Anju Malhotra. "Where there is child marriage, rates of infant mortality are high. Where there is child marriage, there are high rates of domestic violence. Where there is child marriage, there is high prevalence of HIV-AIDS among girls."

The International Women's Health Coalition says girls between the ages of 10 and 14 are five times more likely to die in pregnancy and childbirth than women who are a decade older. It also says complications related to pregnancy and childbirth are the leading cause of death worldwide for females ages 15 to 19.

The U.S. State Department's ambassador-at-large for global women's issues, Melanne Verveer, urged countries to implement and enforce laws that set a minimum age for marriage.

"Child marriage is inextricably linked to the cycle of poverty," said Melanne Verveer. "Girls already in school are often forced to terminate their education when they marry, and married girls are prevented from taking advantage of education and work opportunities."

Malhotra, of the International Center for Research on Women, noted that child marriage is practiced by Hindus, Muslims and Christians alike.

And Francesca Moneti, a senior child protection specialist at the United Nations Children's Fund, echoed that it is widespread.

"We of course know that child marriage affects millions of girls in all regions of the world, and especially in South Asia and in Africa," said Francesca Moneti. "In Bangladesh and in five western central African countries, six of every 10 girls are married before the age of 18."

Moneti and other panelists said child marriage violates girls' human rights.

Moneti said UNICEF and its development partners had seen some encouraging results in places such as Senegal. She said communities chose to abandon child marriage when community leaders were informed about its negative consequences and communities discussed the issue.

Panelists also encouraged U.S. lawmakers to pass the "International Protecting Girls by Preventing Child Marriage Act of 2009". U.S. Congresswoman Betty McCollum, a Democrat from the midwestern state of Minnesota, introduced the act last year.

And, as for Kakenya Ntaiya who is pursuing her doctorate in the U.S., she says her goal is no longer simply to teach primary school. She says she wants to help girls around the world gain access to education, as she has.